Lumen
Selected Proceedings from the Canadian Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies
Travaux choisis de la Société canadienne d'étude du dix-huitième siècle

LUMEN

On Being Difficult: The Pursuit of Wonder

Sarah Tindal Kareem

Volume 39, 2020

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1069402ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7202/1069402ar

See table of contents

Publisher(s)

Canadian Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies / Société canadienne d'étude du dix-huitième siècle

ISSN

1209-3696 (print)
1927-8284 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this article

Kareem, S. T. (2020). On Being Difficult: The Pursuit of Wonder. *Lumen*, *39*, 1–21. https://doi.org/10.7202/1069402ar

Article abstract

Is discomfort intrinsic to wonder? The author pursues this question by showing how early visitors to the Niagara Falls found that efforts to improve the view eliminated the difficulty that made viewing the falls rewarding in the first place. Visitors' experiences accord with eighteenth-century accounts that suggest that wonder thrives on difficulty and desire thrives on inaccessibility. This aesthetic effect finds expression in *The Arabian Nights* and other texts that both represent and enact narrative withholding, and also in the visual form of the arabesque, which beguiles the eye with movement but does not go anywhere. The essay concludes by connecting these insights into aesthetic difficulty to present-day concerns that attempts to bring the humanities to a broader audience may "dumb down" art. I conclude that such concerns miss the point that aesthetic experiences depend upon a tension between legibility and illegibility that artworks continue to generate in new and unforeseen ways.

On Being Difficult: The Pursuit of Wonder
Plenary Lecture[1]

Sarah Tindal Kareem
University of California at Los Angeles

Niagara Falls, Canada: One Wonder After Another.

(Niagara Falls Tourism Campaign Slogan)

I was disappointed with Niagara—most people must be disappointed with Niagara. Every American bride is taken there, and the sight of the stupendous waterfall must be one of the earliest, if not the keenest, disappointments in American married life.

(Oscar Wilde, *Impressions of America*, 1883)

My seven-year old daughter is obsessed with a store called *Aahs!*, a small chain based in Southern California, which sells novelty items, costumes, and party supplies. They call themselves "the ultimate gift store," and their lo-tech website boasts that they are "the go to place for rare gifts."[2] I think of *Aahs!* as a twenty-first century version of an early modern cabinet of curiosities. The many items I have purchased at the Santa Monica outpost of this store over the years include: an Elvis wig; a gorilla mask; a wide selection of fake beards and moustaches; a replica of Thor's hammer; a whip in the fashion of Indiana Jones; countless Japanese-style "squishies" (soft toys made of polyurethane); and a pair of Harry Potter glasses. *Aahs!* is, truly, a repository of wonders (Figure 1).

1. This plenary lecture was adapted to suit the print medium of communication.
2. See http://www.aahs.com/aahs-gift-stores/; accessed 15 April 2019.

Figure 1. The author's daughter outside Aahs! The Ultimate Gift Store on Wilshire Boulevard in Santa Monica, California. Photo taken by author.

For a long time, not having seen the store's name in writing, I thought its name was *Oz*, and that it was named in homage to the magical Land of Oz. When I finally realized that the store was not called *Oz*—as it sounded to my English ears in my daughter's American accent—but *Aahs*, I thought it was a slightly odd name for a store but understood that it was meant to indicate (and perhaps enjoin) the utterance of the exclamation "Ahh" as a response of wonderment to the panoply of curiosities it offered for sale.

When I finally saw the store's name in writing, I was quite befuddled: *Aahs!* The reason for my befuddlement was twofold. The plural marks this word not as an expressive utterance but as a third-person description of such a statement, in free indirect discourse: a person does not say "Ahhs!" as an expressive utterance. A person says "Ahh!" But the exclamation point marks the word as an interjection, a first-person speech-act. The combination of the pluralization and the exclamation point begs the question: who is saying "Aahs!"? Perhaps "Aahs!" expresses the thoughts of a spectator-like-visitor to the store ironically voicing the reactions she attributes to its clientele. In such a scenario, I imagine the speech-act "Aahs!" functioning in something like the way Susanna Rowson ventriloquizes the thoughts of her imagined reader in *Charlotte Temple* (1790): "'BLESS my heart,' cries my young, volatile reader, 'I shall never have patience to get through these volumes, there are so many ahs! And ohs! So much fainting, tears, and distress, I am sick to death of the subject.'"[3]

The second reason for my befuddlement upon seeing "Aahs" written out was the spelling: a-a-h-s, not a-h-h-s. There is a moment in my book, *Eighteenth-Century Fiction and the Reinvention of Wonder* (2014), in which I use the exclamation "Ahh" to emblematize one type of wonder by contrast to another kind that I emblematize with the exclamation "Aha." "Including both marvel's transfixed passivity and curiosity's active movement toward an object," I wrote, "wonder encompasses both stupefaction—'Ah!'—and recognition—'Aha!'—thereby pulling in two different directions simultaneously."[4] It was not an especially original point, but I rather liked the acoustic shorthand:

---

3. Susanna Rowson, *Charlotte Temple and Lucy Temple*, ed. Ann Douglas (New York: Penguin, 1991), 108.

4. Sarah Tindal Kareem, *Eighteenth-Century Fiction and the Reinvention of Wonder* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 8.

wonder equals "Ahh" *plus* "Aha"; or, maybe, wonder is the passage *from* "Ahh" *to* "Aha."[5]

Until I found myself on Wilshire Boulevard staring up at the sign, I had never spared a thought for "Aah." Undoubtedly, "Aah" is an altogether different beast from either "Ahh" or "Aha," and it threw my neat schema for characterizing wonder out of joint. "Aah" is, in fact, an unusual way to spell "Ahh" as an expression of wonderment. Of course, for any word that imitates a natural vocalization, there are countless variant spellings. Moreover, the expression is associated, historically, with a wide range of feelings. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) records that the use of "ah" to express sorrow, distress, or regret slightly precedes its use to communicate pleasure, surprise, wonder, admiration, which in turn slightly precedes its use to convey realization, discovery, or inspiration. Notably, however, the *OED* makes a point of observing that when "ah" is used to express sorrow or pain, the interjection is "Now frequently in form aah (cf. argh *int.*) Expressing pain. Cf. ow *int.*"[6] I rolled my eyes at the decision to spell the store's name in a way conventionally associated with pain instead of wonderment. It was unintentionally apt, I told myself: the name "Aaahs!" unwittingly articulated the silent screams of all the parents corralled into the store by their offspring.

The more I thought about it, however, the slippage in spelling felt emblematic of something more important: the intimate connection between wonder and discomfort. When we think about wonder, we are likely to think of cognates like serenity or awe that characterize a mind in a state of repose. As I tried to show in *Eighteenth-Century Fiction and the Reinvention of Wonder*, however, that is only one facet of wonder; another equally important aspect of wonder is restlessness. Now, I would go further still and propose that discomfort is not a contingent aspect of wonder. Instead, I will argue, an experience of pain or struggle—what I will call an experience of "difficulty"—is a prerequisite for wonder. Put another way: you cannot have the *Ahh* without the *Aah*.

---

5. On the Aha / Ahh dynamic, see Philip Fisher, *Wonder, the Rainbow, and the Aesthetics of Rare Experiences* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 31.

6. See definition 2.b. of entry for *ah*, interjection and noun, *Oxford English Dictionary*, 3rd ed., updated September 2012.

* * *

My interest in the relationship of difficulty to wonder was heightened when, after discovering that the 2018 annual meeting of the Canadian Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies would take place in Niagara Falls, I found myself curious about early accounts of visitors' trips to see this natural wonder. While delving into those eighteenth- and nineteenth-century accounts, it was hard not to be struck by the fact that so many visitors to Niagara were deeply underwhelmed by the falls. Also, there was a curious pattern in how they recorded their experiences of feeling underwhelmed: none of the early visitors expressed disappointment. From the nineteenth century onwards, admissions of disappointment were fairly regular; indeed, a few accounts invoked as common knowledge the notion—affirmed by Oscar Wilde in my epigraph—that the falls disappoint upon first sight.

I initially thought that there was an easy explanation for why so many visitors to Niagara Falls were disappointed. By the early nineteenth century, most visitors would have read or heard about the falls' sublime wonders. How could the real experience of the site live up to the hype? However, many nineteenth-century visitors seemed to have had the opposite experience. They discovered, sometimes to their own surprise, that their high expectations did not lessen the falls' impact upon them. Moreover, even early accounts express anxiety about the possibility that the visitors' high expectations might ruin the experience, and attest to them being bowled over despite these misgivings. For example, one Captain Enys recorded the following in his journal from 1787: "I could not help remarking to Mr. Humphrey that before my arrival I expected to have been disappointed, from having my ideas raised too high by hearing so many people join in their praise, but that I was sure from this view alone no one can say too much of it."[7] Similarly, Isaac Weld noted this about his visit to the falls in 1796: "we could not but express our doubts to each other, that the wondrous accounts we had so frequently heard of the falls were without foundation."[8] In the end, Weld, like Enys,

---

7. Charles Mason Dow, *Anthology and Bibliography of Niagara Falls*, 2 vols. (Albany, NY: J. B. Lyon, 1921), 1.76.

8. Ibid., 1.98. (Reprinted from Isaac Weld, *Travels through the States of North America, and the Provinces of Upper and Lower Canada, during the years 1795, 1796, and 1797*, originally published in 1799.)

found that the level of "astonishment excited in the mind"[9] at Niagara exceeded his expectations.

Eighteenth-century visitors to the falls had heard about their wonders and expected to be disappointed, but they were not. There had to be an alternative explanation for why so many nineteenth-century visitors to the falls were disappointed. Indeed, I stumbled across one in an account by one very dissatisfied nineteenth-century traveller, Francis Hall, who visited the falls in 1816 and 1817. Like all reactions except those of the earliest visitors, his experience of the falls was mediated by accounts he had read. For example, Hall had examined Weld's account and also one by none other than the French philosopher Constantin François de Chassebœuf, comte de Volney.[10] Hall had gleaned from these accounts how difficult it was for both Weld and Volney to walk down to the foot of the falls. Volney took one look at the route and turned around. Here is how Weld described the trek to the foot of the falls:

> In some places, where the cliff has crumbled down, huge mounds of earth, rocks, and trees, reaching to the water's edge, oppose your course; it seems impossible to pass them; and, indeed, without a guide, a stranger would never find his way to the opposite side; for to get there it is necessary to mount nearly to their top, and then to crawl on your hands and knees through long dark holes, where passages are left open between the torn up rocks and trees. After passing these mounds, you have to climb from rock to rock, close under the cliff, for there is but little space here between the cliff and the river, and these rocks are so slippery, owing to the continual moisture from the spray, which descends very heavily, that, without the utmost precaution, it is scarcely possible to escape a fall.[11]

When they finally reach the foot of the waterfalls, Weld is rewarded by an unparalleled view: "No words can convey an adequate idea of the awful grandeur of the scene at this place."[12] During his journey, Hall

---

9. Ibid., 1.102.

10. See C. F. Volney, *A view of the soil and climate of the United States of America: with supplementary remarks upon Florida; on the French colonies on the Mississippi and Ohio, and in Canada; and on the aboriginal tribes of America*, trans. C. B. Brown (Philadelphia: J. Conrad *et al.*, 1804), 80–101.

11. Quoted by Volney in ibid., 86.

12. Ibid., 87.

found, however, conditions at the falls to be very much improved for the site-seer:

> The path grows smooth as it advances to the fall, so that the undivided attention may be given to this imposing spectacle … I passed from sunshine into gloom and tempest … for a moment, it seemed temerity to encounter the convulsive workings of the elements, and intrude into the dark dwellings of their power: but the danger is in appearance only; it is possible to penetrate but a few steps behind the curtain, and in these few, there is no hazard; the footing is good, and the space sufficiently broad and free: there is not even a necessity for a guide, two eyes amply suffice to point out all that is to be seen, or avoided.[13]

To appreciate the significance of what Hall observes next in his travelogue, you need to know that, in his earlier account, Weld makes clear that the descent to the foot of the falls was not a feat he imagines women capable of taking on. He observes that to make it to the *starting point* of the descent was "no trifling undertaking" and "few ladies … could be found of sufficient strength of body to encounter the fatigue of such an expedition."[14]

In this context, it is evident that what Hall encounters, at the foot of the falls twenty years later, reveals how far, as it were, the Niagara Falls have fallen: "During my first visit, there were two young American ladies on the same errand, who were drenched, as well as myself, in the cloud of spray."[15] Hall concludes by remarking, dryly, "I foresee that in a few years travellers will find a finger post, 'To the Falls' Tea Gardens,' with cakes, and refreshments, set out on the Table Rock."[16] What had once been a perilous test of masculine mettle is now a feminized social sphere, and Hall is *not* happy about it. Later in this essay, I will have more to say about gender, difficulty, and wonder. But

---

13. Francis Hall, *Travels in Canada, and the United States, in 1816 and 1817* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1818), 233–34.

14. Quoted in Dow, *Anthology and Bibliography of Niagara Falls*, 1.104. This preparatory descent was achieved via a device known as Mrs. Simcoe's Ladder, so called because it was installed to accommodate the descent of Elizabeth Simcoe, artist and wife of John Graves Simcoe, the first Lieutenant Governor of Upper Canada. Weld observes the fact of the means of descent being expressly devised and named for a woman to use without registering its irony in the context of his broader point.

15. Ibid., 1.146.

16. Ibid.

for now, I want to focus upon the general insight that Hall extracts from the good, easy footing he found at the Niagara Falls: "In my opinion, more is lost than gained, by this facility. The effect produced upon us, by any object of admiration, is increased by the difficulties of approaching it: the imagination does not suffer to be thrown away, a single particle of all that has been expended in the pursuit."[17] In other words, easy access to an object of wonder paradoxically diminishes our experience of wonder. The effort to bring an object of wonder *closer* eliminates the difficulty that makes it an object of pursuit in the first place. For Hall, in other words, there is no *Ahh* nor *Aha* worth speaking of at the end of an endeavour without an *Aah* or two on the way there.

* * *

Two of the central Enlightenment theorists of wonder whose ideas pervade *Eighteenth-Century Fiction and the Reinvention of Wonder* are David Hume and Adam Smith. Revisiting their discussions of wonder in the light of Hall's observations about Niagara Falls, I found that Hume and Smith concur with him that facility and wonder are like oil and water. When caught up in wonder, Smith writes: "The imagination no longer feels the usual facility of passing from the event which goes before to that which comes after."[18] Elsewhere Smith notes that to be in wonder is to experience one's imagination "stopped and embarrassed by … seeming incoherences," as opposed to the "ease and delight" with which the imagination surveys regular occurrences.[19] Indeed, Smith goes so far as to argue that "the whole essence" of wonder consists in "the *difficulty* which it [the imagination] finds in passing along such disjointed objects, and the feeling of something like a gap or interval betwixt them."[20] In sum: wonder, Smith suggests, is

17. Ibid.

18. Adam Smith, "The Principles Which Lead and Direct Philosophical Enquiries, Illustrated by the History of Astronomy," *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, ed. W. P. D. Wightman and J. C. Bryce, Vol. 3: *The Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1982), 41.

19. Ibid., 50.

20. Ibid., 42 (emphasis added).

not comfortable. It is not a feeling of "ease and delight."[21] On the contrary, to experience wonder is to be "stopped and interrupted."[22]

In Book 2 (*Of the Passions*) of a *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739–1740), David Hume likewise links difficulty and wonder. Where for Smith it is an absence of *facility* that produces wonder, Hume emphasizes the "unpliableness in the faculties" when we exert ourselves in an unfamiliar task:

> When the soul applies itself to the performance of any action, or the conception of any object, to which it is not accustom'd, there is a certain unpliableness in the faculties, and a difficulty of the spirit's moving in their new direction. As this difficulty excites the spirits, 'tis the source of wonder, surprize, and of all the emotions, which arise from novelty; and is in itself very agreeable, like every thing, which inlivens [*sic*] the mind to a moderate degree.[23]

For Hume and Smith alike, "wonder" is the name given to the affect produced by difficult cognitive experiences. Hume asserts that this affect is "very agreeable;" Smith's view on whether wonder is a pleasurable feeling is trickier to gauge. Smith echoes Plato and Aristotle in asserting that wonder prompts humans to philosophize, and that one philosophizes "for its own sake, as an original pleasure or good in itself."[24] While this formulation seems to equate philosophic pleasure with wonder, elsewhere Smith argues that the pleasure of philosophizing inheres in *ridding oneself* of wonder and basking in the ensuing feeling of repose when the agitation has passed.[25] Hume by contrast, explicitly identifies such agitation as a source of pleasure:

> Since the imagination, therefore, in running from low to high, finds an opposition in its internal qualities and principles, and since the soul, when elevated with joy and courage, in a manner seeks opposition, and throws itself with alacrity into any scene of thought or action, where its courage meets with matter to nourish and employ it; it follows, that every thing, which invigorates and inlivens [*sic*] the soul, whether by

---

21. Ibid., 58.

22. Ibid.

23. David Hume, A *Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 422–23.

24. Smith, "The Principles Which Lead and Direct Philosophical Enquiries, Illustrated by the History of Astronomy," 51.

25. See ibid., 61–62.

> touching the passions or imagination, naturally conveys to the fancy this inclination for ascent, and determines it to run against the natural stream of its thoughts and conceptions. This aspiring progress of the imagination suits the present disposition of the mind; and the difficulty, instead of extinguishing its vigour and alacrity, has the contrary effect, of sustaining and encreasing [*sic*] it.[26]

Hume's account of how the soul "seeks opposition," "throws itself with alacrity," "meets with matter," and "run[s] against the natural stream" vividly conveys the sense of resistance that characterizes the experience of intellectual exertion. His verbs emphasize that the encounter with resistance is pleasurable in itself.

Hume goes on to argue that difficulty is key to our pleasure in many activities, most notably philosophizing, hunting, and gaming, all of which sustain our attention via their "difficulty, variety, and sudden reverses of fortune."[27] The reason why the exertion of navigating these obstacles is pleasurable, he argues, is because "[h]uman life is so tiresome a scene, and men generally are of such indolent dispositions, that whatever amuses them, tho' by a passion mixt with pain, does in the main give them a sensible pleasure."[28]

It is William Hogarth who develops these observations about discomfort's role in pleasurable activities into a full-blown aesthetic theory in the remarks on intricacy he provides within his 1753 treatise, *The Analysis of Beauty*. Hogarth argues there that intricacy inheres in "that peculiarity in the lines, which compose it, that *leads the eye a wanton kind of chace*."[29] An intricate form leads the eye or mind on a chase by at once inviting and impeding the perceiver's effort to fully grasp its contours. In other words, an intricate form lures the perceiver with the prospect of seeing what is partially hidden from view, thereby driving him or her to engage in the action that Hogarth terms *pursuit*. It is intricacy, in Hogarth's view, that accounts for our pleasure in activities ranging from contemplating forms that exceed our visual field (like a

---

26. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 435.

27. Ibid., 452.

28. Ibid. On the theory of gaming implied by Hume's discussion, see my "Flimsy Materials, or, What the Eighteenth Century Can Teach Us about Twenty-First Century Worlding," *Critical Inquiry* 42, no. 2 (Winter 2016): 374–94.

29. William Hogarth, *The Analysis of Beauty*, ed. Ronald Paulson (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1997), 33; emphasis in original.

serpentine river), to hunting, to perusing riddles or fictions that enlist us in guessing games. We enjoy such activities, Hogarth argues, because of—not despite—the fact that they are difficult and test the limits of our ability to see what is before us.

In order to understand why an object must be difficult in the particular sense of eluding our perceptual grasp, we need to return, briefly, to *Aahs!*. As I noted at the beginning of this essay, the reason why I am so intimately acquainted with *Aahs!* is because it is my daughter's favorite store. While her love for the store is steadfast, she recently discovered for herself the problem so ably articulated by Francis Hall. Once the Elvis wig, the pirate beards, the Indiana Jones whip, and even Thor's hammer were purchased and carried home in triumph, where they were conveniently ready to hand, as Heidegger would put it, they did not hold the same allure for her that they once had.

Therefore, she came up with a solution. The precipitating event was a fight with her twelve-year old brother over the Indiana Jones whip. Frustrated with their bickering over whose turn it was to, er, whip the other, I heard myself saying,

> "If I hear one more word about it, I'm going to … *confiscate* it."
>
> "What's *confiscate*?" asked my daughter, her outrage briefly stayed by her curiosity about the word.
>
> "It means 'take away,'" my son quickly replied. "It means she's going to take it away from you."
>
> "And throw it away?" asked my daughter, aghast.
>
> My son looked to me.
>
> "No, I'm not going to throw it away," I clarified. "I'm going to put it somewhere where you can't get it, until … I decide you deserve to get it back."
>
> "Somewhere like where? Like, in a box?," my daughter pressed me.
>
> "I don't know," I answered, impatiently, "just somewhere out of reach where you can't find it."
>
> "It should be in a *special* box," my daughter said, excitedly. "A *confiscation box*."
>
> She seemed to have the phrase, readymade, to hand.
>
> "A confiscation box?" I repeated. "Uh, well, I don't have a special box."
>
> "*Please* can you get a confiscation box," she pleaded.
>
> "What, why?" I asked, perplexed.
>
> "Because! It would be fun!" she answered.

"The point of confiscating something isn't for fun," I declared, primly.

Later, when playing with a different toy, she pressed me:

"Mom, do you want to confiscate this? Please?"

I was flummoxed. "You get that confiscate means 'take away'? Right?"

Later still, while I wrested the iPad from her hands, she was on the verge of protesting vociferously when she suddenly changed tack and asked, "Wait, are you *confiscating* it?," her eyes lighting up.

I rolled my eyes. "Yes. Sure. I'm confiscating it."

"Are you putting it in the confiscation box?," she asked, barely able to contain her excitement.

"I don't *have* a confiscation box," I reminded her, wearily.

"*Please* will you get one?" she asked.

I shook my head in disbelief.

"I'm really confused," I confessed. "Normally you don't want me to take things away from you. Now you *want* me to confiscate things. But that's the same thing! Do you not want this stuff?"

"No, I do."

"So why do you want me to have a confiscation box?"

"Because …," she hesitated, reluctant to reveal what she'd had in mind, "because then I could try to sneak it out of the box without you noticing."

"But why would you …," I trailed off.

I had been going to ask why she would bother sneaking something back when she could just not have it confiscated in the first place, but before I could get the words out I realized what a stupid question it was. My daughter had stumbled upon a venerable artificial technique for intensifying an object's allure, a technique that forms an object lesson in one of Arnold Lobel's beloved *Frog and Toad* stories, in which our eponymous heroes discover for themselves the desire-quickening properties of restricting access to something you want—in their case, cookies:

> Frog got a ladder.
> He put the box up on a high shelf.
> "There," said Frog.
> "Now we will not eat
> any more cookies."
> "But we can climb the ladder
> and take the box

down from the shelf
and cut the string
and open the box,"
said Toad.
"That is true," said Frog.[30]

The discovery made by my daughter, and Frog and Toad before her, is a variation upon the point already made by Hume, Smith, and Hall: difficulty increases wonder. The variation on this point is the discovery that inaccessibility increases desire.

Now, this is clearly not a new discovery. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, it is a strong contender for being *the* original human discovery. And it is a discovery that eighteenth-century writers mythologize in quite compelling ways. As Angelina Del Balzo notes in her 2019 doctoral dissertation, "'Furbish'd Remnants': Theatrical Adaptation and the Orient, 1660–1815," following the publication of Charles Perrault's "Bluebeard" (1697; English translation 1729) and the English translation of Antoine Galland's *The Arabian Nights* (1704–1717), many eighteenth-century English texts use the trope of the woman who is either locked out or locked in to explore the impact of restraints upon desire, curiosity, and female fidelity.[31] In one of the examples that Del Balzo discusses, from the frame story of *The Arabian Nights*, the experience that spurs the Sultan to marry a new woman each evening and have her executed the next morning is his encounter, while out hunting in the company of his brother, with a beautiful lady whom a genie keeps prisoner in a locked glass box hidden at the bottom of the sea.[32] This beautiful lady boasts to the Sultan and his brother that, "notwithstanding the vigilance of this wicked genie," she "find[s] a way to cheat him" by sleeping with other men while the Genie is resting.[33] She concludes that: "Men had better not put their wives under such restraint, if they have a mind they should be chaste."[34]

---

30. Arnold Lobel, "Cookies," *Frog and Toad Storybook Treasury* (New York: Harper, 2014), 104–5.

31. Angelina Marie Del Balzo, "'Furbish'd Remnants': Theatrical Adaptation and the Orient, 1660–1815," unpublished dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 2019, 119–64.

32. Ibid., 119.

33. Robert L. Mack, ed. *Arabian Nights' Entertainments* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995; reissued 2009), 9.

34. Ibid.

In another example discussed by Del Balzo, the speaker of Matthew Prior's 1704 poem entitled "The Padlock" echoes the lady in the glass box's injunction.[35] Prior's poem targets a jealous husband who declares: "I keep Her in one Room: I lock it: / The Key (look here) is in this Pocket."[36] Prior's speaker asks him whether this method is effective: "Does the Restraint, the Bolt, the Bar, / Make us less Curious, her less Fair?"[37] The poem concludes that it does not, and the speaker recommends that men should stick to clapping their womenfolk in mind-forged manacles: "Let all her Ways be unconfin'd, / And clap your PADLOCK on her Mind."[38]

Del Balzo uses these examples to show how eighteenth-century Orientalist adaptations of texts like *The Arabian Nights* reframe sexual violence as not incidental but intrinsic to marriage. These examples also tell us something about the relationship between difficulty and pursuit. The beautiful woman imprisoned in the locked glass box at the bottom of the sea embodies the aesthetic appeal of what Hogarth calls intricate forms: partially revealed and yet also restricted, just like the stories Scheherazade will spin for the Sultan. We pursue intricate objects because we want to find the end, but we also *do not* want to find the end. We want difficulties to hide the end from us. This is precisely the engine that drives *The Arabian Nights*. At first, *The Arabian Nights* foregrounds and stimulates the drive towards closure: Scheherazade builds up and then strategically disrupts narrative momentum in order to pique the Sultan's curiosity as to what will happen next and, in turn, the reader's curiosity as to whether the tale will prove sufficiently interesting to enable the female storyteller to stave off execution for another day. However, as Claire Kim notes in her recent dissertation on digression in the novel, the frame narrative, and as a result the purpose behind Scheherazade's storytelling, gradually recede from view in the French and English versions of *The Arabian Nights*.[39] When

35. Del Balzo, "'Furbish'd Remnants': Theatrical Adaptation and the Orient, 1660–1815," 120.

36. Matthew Prior, "An English Padlock" (London: Printed for Jacob Tonson, 1705), 1–2.

37. Ibid., 1.

38. Ibid., 2.

39. Claire Kim, "'A Little Out of Its Due Course': The Appeal of the Digressive Chronotope in Early Eighteenth-Century Fiction," unpublished dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 2018, 18–22.

the life-or-death stakes that propel Scheherazade's storytelling fall into the background, the narrative momentum relaxes, as if the account disperses the drive to pursue the quest into the thousand-and-one diverticula of its embedded tales.

The narrative's movement turns in on itself in a style characteristic of the form known as *arabesque*, a close cousin of Hogarth's intricacy. Arabesque is characterized by decorative ornamentation often comprising of floral, leaf-, or shell-work; essentially non-representative. Friedrich Schlegel, Immanuel Kant, as well as other philosophers and artists in the later eighteenth century embraced arabesque's embodiment of art divorced from any use-value.[40] It might seem counter-intuitive to link arabesque—a decorative, ornamental form—with difficulty. Yet arabesque embodies difficulty in the sense that, in lieu of a straight line from A to B, its shape is all forking paths and detours with no discernible end. The only purpose of arabesque's twists and turns is the exertion that it takes to pursue them.

Hogarth speaks to the non-instrumental nature of arabesque's turns when he characterizes the type of form most apt to enlist the viewer's eye in a kind of chase. Such an object would have "every turn in it that lines are capable of moving into, and at the same time no way applied, nor of any manner of use, but merely to entertain the eye."[41] He gives as an example a "figure like a leaf" engraved in the lower left-hand corner of Plate 1 in *The Analysis of Beauty* (Figure 2).[42] He explains that the figure "was taken from an ash-tree, and was a sort of Lusus naturæ, growing only like an excressence, but so beautiful in the lines of its shell-like windings."[43] *Lusus naturae* means, literally, a sport of nature: an object in which we see nature at play. Hogarth's image is, indeed, surreal in its playfulness. It looks like something that Dr. Seuss might have drawn or as if a part of the frame has somehow found its way into the main picture. The figure conveys a sense of purposeless movement.

In similar fashion to Hogarth's lines of beauty and grace, arabesque's curving, decorative nature aligns it with the female body.

---

40. On the arabesque in the eighteenth century, see Winfried Menninghaus, *In Praise of Nonsense: Kant and Bluebeard*, trans. Henry Pickford (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999).

41. Hogarth, *The Analysis of Beauty*, 60.

42. Ibid.

43. Ibid.

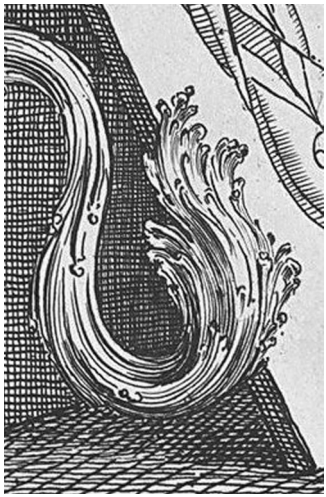

Figure 2. Detail from William Hogarth, *The Analysis of Beauty*, Plate 1, dated March 5, 1753; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (NY), Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1932, accession number 32.35(22).

Read as such, arabesques like Hogarth's *lusus naturae* visually abstract the scene dramatized in "Bluebeard" and countless other fables, in which an unruly, decorative, and feminine presence proves difficult to confine. Whether in the form of a beautiful escapologist who will not be confined to her glass box or the American ladies loitering at the foot of the Niagara Falls, this presence is one that destabilizes the relationship between frame and centre: arabesques will find their way in *and* out, by hook or by crook.[44]

* * *

I want to conclude by reflecting upon how we can harness these insights about the aesthetics of difficulty to better explain what we, as critics, do. Today, debates about how we communicate in the humanities and to what audiences we connect are often gendered in ways that echo these eighteenth-century discussions about difficulty. For example, a recent piece by Jeffrey J. Williams in *The Chronicle of Higher*

44. Carlo Blasis traces arabesque as a pose in ballet directly to ornamentation inspired by "fanciful foliage" in art and architecture. See Carlo Blasis, *The Code of Terpsichore: The Art of Dancing, Comprising Its Theory and Practice, and a History of Its Rise and Progress from the Earliest Times*, trans. R. Barton (London: Edward Bull, 1830), 74.

Education reflects Francis Hall's thoughts about the future of Niagara Falls. Williams laments a shift in academic culture whereby a combative style of engaging with interlocutors has given way to what he characterizes as the milquetoast "affect of the smiling Starbucks server," which does not seem a million miles away from Hall's sardonic prediction that a Tea Gardens with cakes and refreshments will soon have sprung up at the foot of the falls.[45]

In place of an earlier generation of public intellectuals who espoused "dissent, social criticism and risk," the new generation, Williams finds, is comprised of intellectuals who are "fuzzy" in their thinking, beholden to the number of "likes" they receive on social media, and aspire to be "friendable" above all else.[46] Whereas Williams cherishes "independence," Devoney Looser—one of the scholars Williams criticizes for de-fanging the public intellectual—cherishes by contrast, the ability "to connect."[47]

These polarized views of the critic as either independent or connected also appear in recent discussions of how scholars should explain the value of the humanities to students. On the one hand, adepts of change celebrate the ways in which the humanities can promote connection—whether through "relatable" reading experiences or by honing "transferrable" writing skills. On the other hand, many defenders of the humanities insist on their "intrinsic" value—the value of the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake.[48] Taken together, these two emphases—upon art's ability to foster connections with the outside world, on the one hand; upon art's self-sufficiency, on the other—express what Donald Winnicott called the "sophisticated game of hide-and-seek" that he saw art as embodying.[49] In Winncott's account,

---

45. Jeffrey J. Williams, "The Rise of the Promotional Intellectual," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 6 August 2018; https://www.chronicle.com/article/The-Rise-of-the-Promotional/244135, accessed 15 May 2019 (access by subscription).

46. Ibid.

47. Devoney Looser, "Writing a Book or Article? Now's the Time to Create Your 'Author Platform,'" *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 16 July 2018; https://www.chronicle.com/article/Writing-a-Book-or-Article-/243911, accessed 15 May 2019 (access by subscription).

48. On defenses of the humanities based on their intrinsic value, see Helen Small, *The Value of the Humanities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), especially Chapter Five.

49. Donald W. Winnicott, "Communicating and Not Communicating Leading to a Study of Certain Opposites," in *The Collected Works of D. W. Winnicott: Volume*

art is a game in which two competing desires always co-exist in productive tension: the desire to communicate and the desire to be hidden. As Winnicott puts it, for the subject caught between these competing desires, "*it is joy to be hidden but disaster not to be found*."[50]

I think we can constructively also think of the act of criticism as a game in which these two desires—the desire to communicate and the desire to be hidden—coexist in productive tension. There is pleasure in connection—in both seeking and being found. There is also pleasure in being independent: in being "hidden," to use one of Winnicott's terms, which implies not concealment but being attuned to the self's own subjective objects—to dreams, desires, ideals. Thinking of the study of literature as a game of hide-and-seek means not having to choose between the competing values of autonomy and connection.

Hogarth's *lusus naturae* emblematizes this simultaneous impulse for self-sufficiency and connection. Having "no manner of use," it exists only for its own sake. And yet it plays well, we might say, with others, in its unfurling into contiguous spaces. We are back, here, in the aesthetic space of Niagara Falls, the curls and crests of which play in an endless movement without going anywhere, dazzling the eye while also eluding it.

I wrote the previous sentence—and most of this essay—before seeing the Niagara Falls for myself. Before seeing them firsthand, I wondered if I, like Hall, would be disappointed. The situation in which I first saw the falls could not have been better devised to test this essay's hypothesis that facility inhibits wonder: the bus driver missed the exit for my hotel and had to loop around, unexpectedly taking me (her only passenger) directly past a prime viewing spot. She stopped the bus for a few seconds so I could take a look. "It's like fairyland!," I murmured, awestruck and then, a few minutes later, slightly crestfallen to discover my thesis so unequivocally destroyed by the momentary glimpse of the falls from the comfort of my bus seat.

Although my experience seeing the falls in person in one way belied the idea that facility inhibits wonder, in another way, it reconfirmed it. Even as, certainly, the Niagara Falls are clearly more acces-

---

6, *1960–1963*, ed. Lesley Caldwell and Helen Taylor Robinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 6.

50. Ibid.; emphasis in original.

sible than they were when Volney and Weld visited, in another way "the difficulties of approaching it" persist. Indeed, this difficulty does not fade away even as Hall's vision of the falls becoming a feminized social sphere has come to pass, although not with the consequences he imagined. To walk along the pedestrianized path that borders the Canadian side of the falls in 2018 and witness hundreds of visitors facing *away* from the natural wonder with beaming smiles, their faces angled upwards, was to understand that selfies are the dominant mode through which we consume and mediate the site at the present time. This fact could easily be used to support Hall's prediction that the Niagara Falls would become a mere backdrop for the performance of female sociability. While, in Hall's day, "there is not even a necessity for a guide," now the experience can also be recorded and disseminated without assistance. And yet such an accounting of the experience of the Niagara Falls in 2018 would be insufficient and would fail to explain the way in which the falls themselves, as a perceptual object, push back against the perceiver's attempts to see them.

I discovered this at first hand in my numerous efforts to take a selfie of myself at the falls. Pose; press; peruse; I repeated this process over and over, conscious that, in doing so, I had become part of the spectacle of selfie-takers for the passersby. Why did I take so many? When I examined a picture, I would inevitably either be framed against a totally white backdrop, the Niagara Falls somehow rendered invisible by the angle, or else, in my effort to capture the site, I would have cut myself out of the frame altogether. I heard myself murmuring out loud that the Niagara Falls were "too big for the frame." I discovered that the angle at which the phone had to be held in order to render the falls visible made it almost impossible to simultaneously keep my face in the frame. I sat next to another woman for some minutes, both of us continuously retaking selfies. "This is harder than it looks," she observed.

Rather than making the Niagara Falls facile, the experience of repeatedly trying and failing to take a selfie with them captured their paradoxical nature. When I took the boat into the horseshoe-shaped water basin at the basis of the falls (in the company of an intrepid cohort of CSECS attendees), the way I found to describe the natural wonder up close was as "an actual optical illusion." The closer you got, the more, in fact, the falls seemed to elude the effort to perceive them. The continuous falling motion is exactly the kind that, as Hogarth puts

Figure 3. *The most surprising CATARACT of NIAGARA in Canada*, hand-coloured engraving after a design from Robert Hancock (1730–1817); from John Hamilton Moore, *Moore's Voyages & Travels* (1779). Courtesy of the Bachinski/Chu Print Study Collection.

it, "leads the eye a wanton kind of chace." But the eye's ability to follow the relentless falling motion is impeded by the rising mist, producing a perceptual dissonance, one that I think is beautifully captured in Figure 3.

I still think that wonder thrives upon difficulty. But my experience seeing the Niagara Falls has made me rethink my hypothesis that bringing an object of wonder *closer* eliminates the difficulty that makes it an object of pursuit in the first place, thereby diminishing our experience of wonder. Some objects—however extensively they are reproduced, however heavily mediated our perception of them, however apparently easy to access—are inherently difficult. We do not need to worry about them being made too easy. Sometimes, indeed, the very fact that they *can* be approached so closely is what creates the perceptual difficulty: even more than the selfies, the mist that clung to our pink ponchos, hair, and eyelashes proved that we were no longer in a position to wonder at or about the falls; we were now *in* them, and that disorienting upending of figure and ground, spectacle and spectator, was itself the marvel.